Reading the
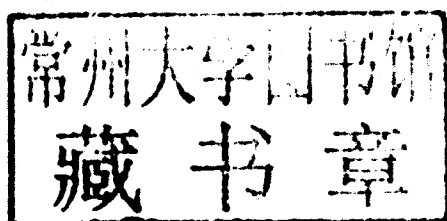# Contemporary Irish Novel
1987–2007

Liam Harte

Reading the
Contemporary Irish Novel
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WILEY Blackwell

READING THE NOVEL

General Editor: **Daniel R. Schwarz**

The aim of this series is to provide practical introductions to reading the novel in both the British and Irish, and the American traditions.

For Yvonne and Oisín

Acknowledgements

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My deepest debt, as ever, is to the dedicatees of this book, my wife Yvonne and my son Oisín, who are my richest sources of support, inspiration and joy.

Some parts of this book have been previously published, though all have been revised and expanded for publication here. Different versions of the Introduction and Chapters 4, 5, 8 and 9 have appeared in the following forms: "'Tomorrow we will change our names, invent ourselves again': Irish fiction and autobiography since 1990," in *Irish Literature Since 1990: Diverse Voices*,

Contents

Introduction: Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987–2007

The novel is the only developing genre and therefore it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981)[1]

Our mistake was to assume that we could be at home in a single nation. We fed ourselves on ideologies of violence and instant salvation, the illusion that history is a continuum moving forward to its perfect destiny. We thus forgot that we can never be at home anywhere. Perhaps it is one of the functions of writers and artists to remind the nation of this. To expose the old ideologies. To feel in exile abroad and also when one returns home. To remain faithful to the no-place (*u-topos*) in us all.

Neil Jordan, "Imagining Otherwise" (1988)[2]

This book examines some of the most well-known and critically feted works of contemporary Irish literary fiction, all of which were published during a twenty-year period that witnessed accelerated change in virtually every sphere of the country's economic, social, cultural, political, and religious life, and which was paralleled by an uncommon flourishing of literary and artistic creativity.[3]

It is written primarily for third-level students of Irish literature and culture, and as such my textual choices have been significantly influenced by university syllabi at home and abroad, though my chief guide has been my sense of the moral and aesthetic quality of the fiction itself. I have also drawn on my extensive experience of teaching and writing about Irish fiction outwith Ireland over the past two decades, of which this book is the latest fruit. As the select number of novels chosen for analysis indicates, this study does not purport to be comprehensive in its scope or set out to offer a final account of a subject whose defining characteristic is its thematic and stylistic diversity. Nor am I trying to recommend a canon of contemporary Irish fiction: we are much too close in time to this literary corpus to achieve anything approaching a settled perspective on it. Moreover, eight of the nine novelists whose work is discussed in this study are still flourishing, and I suspect every reader will wish certain authors had been represented by a different novel.

In terms of its methodology, this book does not advocate any one critical approach to the Irish novel or seek to clothe it in an overarching theory, not least because most of my chosen works resist or exceed conventional critical categories. Instead, I adopt freely as I see fit from a range of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, guided by the resonances and refractions of each text. Such a pluralistic approach means that no single thesis or expository framework governs my analysis. Direct, close engagement with the individual texts matters more to me than elaborating a fixed critical position or adhering to a particular academic mandate. Rather than provide a stocktaking of literary trends or parse the contemporary canon according to various "isms," my aim has been to offer substantial and detailed critical readings of some of the works I consider to be the most sharply provocative and keenly insightful recent fictional enquiries into particular aspects of Irish history, culture, and society. That "some" is worth stressing: the book could easily have expanded to twice its eventual size, given the richness of the primary sources from which to choose. As it is, all nine of the novelists discussed here have won international acclaim for the literary excellence of their human and social portraiture. Between them, they have garnered an array of prestigious citations and awards, including the Costa Book of the Year Award (Sebastian Barry), the European Prize for Literature (Edna O'Brien), the *Guardian* Fiction Prize (Seamus Deane), the Impac Dublin Literary Award (Colm Tóibín), the *Irish Times*/Aer Lingus Literary Award (John McGahern and Patrick McCabe), the Man Booker Prize (Roddy Doyle and Anne Enright), and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award (William Trevor).

But even without such garlands, there are good grounds for ranking the accomplishments of the contemporary cohort of Irish novelists highly and for devoting serious critical attention to their contribution to the unsettling and remaking of the national imagination that has accompanied the country's

reinvention of itself since the 1980s. The artistry, diversity, and incisiveness of these and other novelists' narrative responses to the changing life of the times in general, and to the complexities of a mutating Irish culture and identity in particular, has made for universally compelling works of fiction that have extended and consolidated the Irish novelistic tradition after Joyce, intellectually, affectively, and imaginatively. "The Irish novel is intensely related to the body politic,"[4] observes Colm Tóibín, and in the work of the nine novelists under discussion here the narration of the nation takes on a heightened interrogative and sociological complexion. Each of these writers strategically collapses the boundaries between the personal and the national in an attempt to capture the fractured, conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience and to explore the gap between lived realities and inherited narratives of origin, identity, and place. The interconnected themes of history, memory, and belonging – all fiercely contested categories in Irish cultural discourse – are therefore central to the book's focus. So too is the ideology of the nuclear family, which circulates through these eleven novels with cyclonic persistence, fanning the warring energies that permeate the parent-child relationships they portray. Although they exceed any single story we might wish to tell about them, all of these novels were composed at a time when the artificially constructed narratives of Irishness that claimed cultural authority since the foundation of the state were giving way to a rich diffusion of voices and perspectives, inflected by a complex interplay of competing artistic, political, and social agendas. Each of these authors participates in this process of renegotiating received meanings of nationality and creating spaces for a revised rhetoric of Irishness, just as each seeks a literary language, rhythm, and form that might match what Fintan O'Toole described as "the angular, discontinuous, spliced-together nature of contemporary Irish reality."[5] Some do it by offering charged portrayals of individuals and communities in chronic crisis; others by fashioning scenarios that foreground contradiction, contingency, and open-endedness; and others still by focusing on protagonists whose singular choices and stigmatized identities unsettle authorized narratives of belonging. Generational and attitudinal differences notwithstanding, all nine novelists find deficiencies in totalizing narratives of the past, refuse to fix the nation in unambiguous paradigms, and pose awkward, complex questions about the adequacy of nationality as a foundational fiction for the self.

Having situated my chosen novels within a particular sociohistorical matrix, it behoves me to provide some calibration of the realities with which they engage, though I do so in the full knowledge that any scene-setting survey can but skim the surface. A small sampling of social and political contexts must be made nonetheless. Few cultural critics would disagree that the Ireland of 1987 was a society in the throes of political and economic crisis, with optimism in

short supply within both jurisdictions on the island. Writing in July of that year, the journalist Tim Pat Coogan described the country as "a world trouble spot" that infiltrates "the subconscious of television viewers and newspaper readers [through] such words as 'hunger strikes', 'IRA', 'Paisley', 'murder.'"[6] He was, of course, referring to Northern Ireland, which was still mired in an intractable bloody struggle between two mutually exclusive sets of nationalisms. The situation got bleaker still on November 8, 1987, when 11 people were killed by an IRA bomb at a Remembrance Day ceremony in the Fermanagh town of Enniskillen, an atrocity that inflamed murderous sectarian divisions even further. Meanwhile, the Republic was enduring its own social and economic purgatory, as Coogan noted: "at the time of writing, there are more people unemployed (240,000) than work in manufacturing industry or as farmers. Forty percent of the Irish population depends to some extent on social welfare."[7] These statistics would have been much worse were it not for emigration, the "mirror in which the Irish nation can always see its true face,"[8] as Liam Ryan so aptly described it at the time. The latest – so-called "third wave" – of emigration peaked in the 1987–1989 period, during which an estimated 172,000 people left the Republic, the great majority of whom went to Britain.[9] Coogan's account of his chance meeting with six recently arrived Irish graduates on a London bus in September 1986 provides a snapshot of the nature and scale of this scattering:

. . . .

All six had just qualified as civil engineers and they had with them the previous Sunday's *Sunday Press*, which carried a large picture of their graduating class – of the 47 beaming young faces in the photograph, only one had a permanent job in Ireland, two had temporary work, and the other 44 were emigrants. Very few, initially at least, were working as engineers. My six had worked as labourers, temporary barmen, whatever they could get, in some cases at jobs lasting only four or six days each. [...] They had been doubling up in friends' bedsitters, sneaking into hostels after hours with illegally-held keys, and generally subsisting in a variety of ways never envisaged by themselves or their parents as they worked their way through sixteen difficult, costly years of education.[10]

. . . .

Seven years later, in late 1993, the commentator John Waters was so dismayed by the ongoing effects of this still-unstanched human exodus that he sounded an extravagant death knell for a moribund nation:

. . . .

Walk into almost any town in the west of Ireland and take a deep breath. You will *inhale* the smell of the decomposition of the Irish economy. This is the smell of Appalachia. If you do not believe the evidence of your own lungs, look up the

most recent census figures which show that every county and town in the west of Ireland suffered dramatic population losses in the five years to 1991. We are losing our people at a frightening rate. [...] This country is finished. A year or two ago, I might have added an 'unless we do X or Y . . .' But the time for unlesses has run out. Our condition is terminal; it is just a matter of a few years.[11]

....

While it is easy in retrospect to smile at how spectacularly wrong Waters' controversy-courting pronouncement was soon proved to be, his despair is a useful barometer of national morale on the eve of the Republic's improbable 1990s economic revival. For by the time the few years in question had elapsed, this seemingly doomed polity had transformed itself into a booming high-tech economy, one suffused with optimism and cultural confidence and experiencing previously unheard-of levels of prosperity. Ireland's astonishing makeover from pauper to prince was driven by a variety of factors, some of which originated from outside the country and some from earlier political choices and shifts in government economic policy (though time would expose the profound, and profoundly consequential, lack of political vision behind the country's slavish embrace of global capitalism). Economist Daniel McCoy summarizes the key drivers of growth as follows:

....

EU membership and access to the Single Market; Ireland's low corporation tax rate and a large multinational presence, particularly from the U.S.; a high proportion of the population of working age; increased participation in the labor market, especially by females; a reversal of the trend of emigration toward immigration; sustained investment in education and training; coordinated social partnership agreements; and a more stable public finance position.[12]

....

The social effects of sudden prosperity soon became graphically apparent in the form of hyperconsumerism, urban gridlock, breakneck building projects, soaring property prices, and a dramatic increase in immigration from central Europe, Asia, and Africa, which peaked at almost 110,000 in the twelve months to April 2007, and was both the herald of a multicultural future and a trigger for racially motivated attacks on foreigners.[13] The benefits of the boom were far from evenly distributed, however, and the exclusionary processes it produced fuelled rising levels of social inequality, criminality, homelessness, alcohol consumption, and suicide.[14] Nevertheless, by the century's end, Ireland Inc. was being touted as the poster child of globalization, topping the index of the most globalized nations on earth in 2000 and 2001, as measured by the Washington-based *Foreign Policy* magazine.[15] With an annual average growth

rate of 6.5% throughout the 1990s, the Republic's economic resurrection drew favorable comparisons with the "tiger" economies of East Asia, prompting a London-based economist with the investment bank Morgan Stanley to coin the appellation "Celtic Tiger" on August 31, 1994,[16] a term that, as Colin Coulter notes, would soon "slip its moorings" and "come to operate as a widely recognized and understood master signifier for a very particular and essentially hegemonic reading of the nature of contemporary Irish society."[17]

By coincidence, August 31, 1994 was also the day on which the IRA declared "a complete cessation of military operations," an announcement that proved to be the first of several watershed moments in the Northern Ireland "peace process," shorthand for the province's tortuously slow transition from protracted civil conflict to a negotiated political settlement between unionism, nationalism, and the Irish and British governments. When the resultant Belfast Agreement of 1998 created the conditions for economic regeneration north of the border, many were persuaded that a tamer cousin of the phantasmal beast running amok down south had emerged. Nine years later, just before the rampant Tiger vanished like the Cheshire cat's grin, the world's media again reverberated with the words "IRA" and "Paisley," but this time in circumstances that would have been utterly unimaginable to Coogan and his readers two decades earlier. In May 2007 Sinn Féin (the IRA's political alter ego) and the Democratic Unionist Party, still led by Ian Paisley, reached a historic agreement to share power in the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, thus clearing the way for the cogovernance of the province by the "extremes" of nationalism and unionism. Both parties were returned to power in the 2011 Assembly elections and, at the time of writing (spring 2013), still lead a multiparty coalition. Bone-deep ethnic and sectarian divisions persist behind these power-sharing arrangements, however, and sporadic paramilitary violence continues to threaten the province's political and economic future, as does the embittered alienation of those socially deprived communities that have not felt the benefit of any peace dividend.

These, then, are some of the significant milestones on Ireland's journey from the "creeping catastrophe" and "petty apocalypse"[18] of the 1980s to socioeconomic and cultural revitalization in the 2000s, during which Irishness became for a time a fashionable global brand, having been "sanitised and made remarkably accommodating to the dominant elitist project of subservient assimilation into multinational capitalism; robbed of reference points from a rich and subversive history."[19] The story of societal and attitudinal change is much more complex than this limited summary allows, however, and, as in any society, whether "in transition" or not, a proliferation of continuities and countercurrents complicate conventional linear notions of change and development. From many (poorer) people's perspective, little changed fundamentally during

the years of Ireland's intensive economic growth and it wasn't hard to discern the undertow of nineteenth-century currents beneath globalized surfaces. So while it is necessary to acknowledge the radical displacement of long-standing historical patterns, we should also bear in mind the enduring antinomies of modernity and tradition in the new Irish commercial culture of the 1990s and 2000s. Take the example of Catholic religiosity in the Republic. On the face of it, the sudden surge in levels of personal affluence in the 1990s quickened the trend toward secularism and accelerated the jettisoning of traditional social and moral orthodoxies, although money was not the sole or even the primary factor in these developments. The decline in the authority of Catholic churchmen on state and society was already underway by the time the nation's coffers began to swell, as a more critically aware and less deferential populace rejected the idea that civil law in a pluralist society should be based on the teachings of one religion. The scandal generated by the revelation in 1992 that Eamon Casey, the high-profile Bishop of Galway, had fathered a son with an Irish-American divorcée eighteen years earlier had a seismic impact on the ordinary faithful, exposing the moral hypocrisy of an all-pervading institution in Irish life. To observers such as Colm Tóibín, the news was not wholly unexpected:

. . . .

For years, it had been clear that something like this would have to come into the open. In the mid-eighties, rancorous battles had been fought over divorce and abortion, and the liberal side – our side – had lost. There were times when we felt the country was going to burst at the seams with hypocrisy.[20]

. . . .

Yet as Tóibín goes on to note, the scandal proved to be "only one of several previously unimaginable incidents that began to transform both the moral and the political climate of Holy Catholic Ireland."[21] The bishop's transgression soon paled beside the litany of horrific crimes committed against children and vulnerable young adults by pedophile priests and religious leaders, which were routinely covered up by the church hierarchy until their widespread media exposure in the 1990s and 2000s. Years of official investigation into the chronic emotional, physical, and sexual abuse inflicted upon children in various religious-run institutions culminated in the publication in 2009 of the Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, commonly known as the Ryan Report, which outlined the crimes of more than 800 known abusers in over 200 institutions during a period of thirty-five years. An *Irish Times* editorial described the Report as "the map of an Irish hell" and starkly set out the consequences of the findings for the nation's self-image: "We have to deal with

the now-established fact that, alongside the warmth and intimacy, the kindness and generosity of Irish life, there was, for most of the history of the State, a deliberately maintained structure of vile and vicious abuse. [. . .] [A]buse was not a failure of the system. It was the system."[22] "Never before," observed one commentator, "has a single, formerly powerful, and highly respected sector of Irish society turned, within little more than a decade, into a focus for almost universal contempt and condemnation."[23]

And yet despite the damage done to its temporal power and influence by these clerical scandals, the Catholic Church did not wither. Catholicism remains the dominant religion in the state, in spite of the church's crisis of credibility and the rise of religious pluralism. Census results from 2002 and 2006 showed that, although religious practice was in decline, the great majority of the population (90% and 87%, respectively) still identified themselves as Catholic, and pilgrimage sites such as Lough Derg in County Donegal and Knock in County Mayo have continued to thrive.[24] Indeed, Knock, the site of a reported Marian apparition in 1879, made national headlines in late 2009 and again in 2010 when several thousand people flocked there in response to predictions by a self-proclaimed visionary of an imminent apparition by the Virgin Mary. In scenes that recalled earlier outbreaks of magical devotionalism at times of socioeconomic crisis, the credulous and the curious stared at the sun for hours, camera phones and digital recorders in hand. From this, one might conclude that whereas the Catholic Church's psychosexual stranglehold has weakened, the grip of folk religion on many Irish minds endures.

Any account of the peculiar nature of Irish modernity must therefore attend to what sociologist Carmen Kuhling terms "the diverse and antagonistic character of the transformations that have accompanied Ireland's experience of accelerated modernization."[25] She herself borrows Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" to make sense of the contradictory cultural tendencies that characterize a society being reshaped in the furnace of globalization and the communications revolution. Her claim that "The experience of living in contemporary Ireland is that of living in an in-between world, in between cultures and identities – an experience of liminality,"[26] chimes with film historian Martin McLoone's memorable assertion that Ireland in the swinging 1990s inhabited "a cultural space somewhere between its nationalist past, its European future and its American imagination."[27] Such diagnoses speak to the pervasive sense of fragmentation and unease that was one of the most notable corollaries of the country's newfound prosperity and economic self-confidence. Reflecting on the international marketing of Irish cultural distinctiveness in the 1990s through such forms as the theme pub and the musical extravaganza *Riverdance*, Terence Brown concluded: "In such phenomena, Irish identity, rather

than remaking itself in acts of imagination, seemed bereft of significance, a simulacrum in a world of simulacra, where meaning had been hollowed out to allow for the easy transportation and assembly of Ireland Lite."[28] But perhaps the most succinct summary of the depthless nature of Irish capitalist modernity was provided by the commentator who declared that "Everywhere in the mentality of the Irish people are flux and uncertainty. Our national consciousness may be described, in a native phrase, as a quaking sod. It gives no footing. It is not English, not Irish, nor Anglo-Irish."[29] A vivid verdict to be sure, but not a recent one, considering the writer was Daniel Corkery and the year not 1991 or 2001 but 1931. I cite his remarks as a reminder that anxieties about the instability and inauthenticity of Irish cultural identity are by no means new. Flux rather than fixity has been the historical norm, a point that should be borne in mind at the same time as we acknowledge that each generation fashions its own diverse set of responses to an identity that has long been perceived as being out of joint.

The specific novelistic challenges presented by the splintering of the grand *récit* of Irishness under the impact of 1990s globalization were succinctly set out by Fintan O'Toole in a 2001 *Irish Times* article:

. . . .

What has happened, essentially, is that the emergence of a frantic, globalised, dislocated Ireland has deprived fiction writers of some of their traditional tools. One is a distinctive sense of place. To write honestly of where most of us live now is to describe everywhere and nowhere [...]. The other troublesome change is the collapse of the very notion of a national narrative. Throughout the 20th century, it was possible for Irish writers to tell stories which seemed in one way or another to relate to a bigger story of revival, revolution, repression and collapse. [...] These days, it is by no means clear what the big story of Ireland actually is, or indeed that the whole notion of 'Ireland' as a single framework has any validity.[30]

. . . .

Given these challenges, critical evaluations of the effectiveness of literary novelists' negotiation of the relationship between the social and the imaginary orders during this era of long-term cultural shifts have tended to be quite negative. Before the 1990s were out, George O'Brien was expressing concern at the lack of concerted fictional treatment of social change: "All too few contemporary Irish literary novels portray the shifts in class structure, the political fallout, the moral challenges, the conflict of outlooks that have typified Irish life of late, and in doing so has lent the airs and graces of modern democracy to Ireland at the present time."[31] While sympathizing with the novelist's predicament, Declan